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ABSTRACT

Television commercials convey to the audience through symbols, metaphors, and myths the feelings and emotions deeply rooted in our culture. While commercials on one level are concerned with a representation of the product or service, they are on another level a symbol of a larger meaning: love, family, romance, motherhood, or hero worship. A can of Diet Pepsi is simply a soft drink, but in the hands of a creative television director, it can symbolize youth, beauty, and gaiety. It could also be said that television commercials act as metaphors. For example, the mother pouring out a particular breakfast cereal for her children may be seen as a metaphor for the love and security she provides. Commercials also rely on symbolism. A commercial for Cascade dishwasher detergent uses symbols throughout, and in some ways may synthesize the viewer's feelings for Christmas, since the most obvious symbol is the use of the colors red and green in the background and the clothing of the actors. Certain commercials concern themselves with myths, in much the same way that commercials use symbols: to communicate something about ourselves or our heritage, quickly and densely; consider the Marlboro Man as the embodiment of the myth of the West. Television commercials, then, can be seen as using symbols, myths, and metaphors to convey meanings of more than just a product. (HOD)

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ADVERTISING DIVISION

TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: SYMBOLS, MYTHS AND METAPHORS

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TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: SYMBOLS, MYTHS AND METAPHORS

The following is part of a larger study in which it is hypothesized that some television commercials may be considered art.¹ However, in order to be considered art, one criterion is that of multi-dimensionality. Art is communication, but so is a street sign. Art, however, communicates on more than one level of meaning. One method by which art communicates is through the use of symbols.

In discussing the portrait of Renoir's wife Canaday makes the point that, as with any great piece of art, there is the surface or obvious point to be made, in this case ". . . a pleasing portrait of a buxom young woman" and beneath that " . . . a second, deeper meaning by which it becomes the image of an earth goddess . . ."2 In other words, the woman in the painting symbolizes the earth goddess. Much in art deals with symbols. The soaring forms of the Gothic cathedrals symbolized the mystical faith of the Middle Ages. There is a universality of symbols that conveys a larger meaning immediately, simultaneous to the initial impact of the work of art.

Price calls the world of television commercials 'mythic' and the family represents paradise. "A teary mist often drifts over scenes in which the family gathers around the huge table filled with food; light glows around Mom, Dad and Grandpa; we look at them from a kid's eye level; we hear sentimental music keening in the background . . .: Price points out that in commercials ". . . you can go home again . . ." to that perfect paradise with

¹Florence G. Feasley, Television Commercials: The "Unpopular Art," Unpublished.

²John Canaday, What is Art?, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), p. 18.

the idealized family, which is symbolized in commercials.³

The semiologist Marshal Blonsky says, "A good advertiser knows what myths or pieces of culture are more prominent at a given moment and latches on to them finding appropriate signals to trigger them."⁴

While television commercials on one level are concerned with a representation of the product or service, are at times themselves a symbol of a larger meaning: love, family, romance, motherhood, hero worship. Many of the situations represented on television commercials are ordinary and mundane, i.e., the first day of school for a shy child, a family reunion made happier by the return of the 'prodigal son'. The first example refers to a Kodak commercial; the second, to a McDonald institutional ad.

However, as Preble remarked, "Art is the demonstration that the ordinary is extraordinary."⁵

As an example Arnheim discusses Picasso who ". . . conveys to us in a painting the gentle ways in which a mother guides the first steps of her unsteadily walking child; we see gentleness as a general quality exemplified in a particular case. In this sense it is valid to say that Picasso's picture symbolizes gentleness."⁶

In the same way, the first tottering steps taken by a small child, and

³Jonathan Price, The Best Thing On Television, (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), p. 44.

⁴Barbara Lippert, "How Semiotics Upped Underwear's Bottom Line," ADWEEK, Nov. 15, 1982, p. 25.

⁵Duane Preble, Man Creates Man, (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1973), p. 13.

⁶Rudolph Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), p. 457.

being recorded on film by the pleased father as the joyous mother looks on, while selling the image of GE as the company that does so much for so many, at the same time symbolizes parenthood in a way that can touch our emotions profoundly.

The French filmmaker, Andre Bazin said, "A symbol can be defined as something that represents something else, as well as being a thing in itself." He points to the now famous snow sled, Rosebud, in the film, Citizen Kane, which is a child's toy but ". . . also emerges as a symbol of Kane's lost innocence and childhood."⁷

A can of Diet Pepsi is simply a soft drink, but in the hands of a creative television director, can symbolize youth, beauty and gaiety. As Bazin observes, "Movies can employ symbols with great density."⁸ So, too, do commercials. It is in fact necessary in many cases to rely on symbols in order to convey meaning in a minute or less.

". . . The symbols depicted on television screens become for many Americans a means of locating themselves in an ordered world. Where traditional institutions and high art do not provide meaningful public symbols, television images rush in to fill the void."⁹

Art through the ages has used symbols to convey certain meanings, in an instantly recognizable fashion. Consider Jan Van Eyck's Marriage of Giovanni Arnolfini and Giovanna Cenami. While today it is considered a masterpiece,

⁷Ellen Goodman, Boston Globe, June 2, 1982.

⁸Louis D. Gianetti, Goddard and Others. Essays on Film Form, (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1975), p. 102.

⁹Gregor Goethals, The TV Ritual, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), p. 4.

and a charming example of painting from that period in Flemish art, to viewers of the work in 1434, the symbols used had very definite and specific meanings, beyond the simple depiction of the young couple. Most of these symbols were particular to that age, and are now unreadable to contemporary viewers. But at the time, they were a visual shorthand to convey certain meanings to the audience, just as symbols in television commercials are used as a visual shorthand. Visual or graphic symbols are used for rapid communication, for the circumstance when words either will not suffice or are not within the medium used. Commercials themselves do not have time to slowly build a drama, or carefully explain a product. There must be almost instant recognition on behalf of the audience.

Goethals likes to think of television commercials as an icon, although at the same time linking icon with symbol.

"Disdained though it may be, the television commercial is the most distinctive icon in our secular culture. The commercial works as a kind of 'organic' connector linking together consumers, imagemakers, producers, and contributes more to the mediating of ideas than any other type of programming. Since the subject of the commercial is the product itself, it can use any of the symbolic worlds that is more convenient."¹⁰

It could also be said that television commercials may act as a metaphor. Fiske and Hartley use as an example the "... mother pouring out a particular breakfast cereal for her children." This can be seen as a metaphor for "... the love and security she provides."¹¹ Or, the mother is a symbol of nurturing and caring. The mustached villain of a nineteenth century melodrama

¹⁰Goethals, ibid., p. 136.

¹¹John Fiske and John Hartley, Reading Televisin, (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1978), p. 50.

was instantly recognizable as a symbol of evil. Equally recognizable is the supercilious and nosy neighbor who strikes terror in the hearts of young brides incapable of making drinkable coffee.

Some commercials, (which are made with infinitely more painstaking attention to detail, cost, and some might say creativity than television programs), communicate with a brilliance comparable only to film, within the context of a mass medium.

"Whenever we encounter images - on billboards and posters in the street, through television screens or in the museum - we are seeing small segments of human experience made visible. The imagemaker has turned a selected bit of experience into an 'object of contemplation.' Whether moving frames or static marks on paper, all images are products of this fundamental symbolizing activity."¹²

As Goethals also points out Currier and Ives prints were not realistic depictions of life, but rather were 'symbolic records.'¹³ Such symbols as these are cherished by the public as they are so deeply rooted in this culture. Anheuser-Busch uses the Currier and Ives symbols as a Christmas greeting, with their great Clydesdales, carriage and footmen jingling across a snowy landscape. It is a Currier and Ives print come to life. That it is also a reminder of a beer company is not relevant to its beauty, nor to its touching a response in the public through its symbolism.

Why is this symbolism so satisfying? It is a story-telling, mythic scene. Goffman points out that, "The magical ability of the advertiser to use a few models and props to evoke a lifelike scene of his own choosing

¹²Goethals, op. cit., p. 33.

¹³Ibid., p. 39.

is not primarily due to the art and technology of commercial photography." It is, among other things, ". . . the readiness of all of us to switch at any moment from dealing with the real world to participating in make-believe ones."¹⁴

A commercial for Cascade dishwasher detergent uses symbols throughout, and in some ways may synthesize the viewers' feelings for Christmas. The most obvious symbol is color, the use of red and green, both in the background and the clothing of the actors. The innocence and delight of the young, and the manner with which they greet that holiday, is reflected in the faces of the young actors', glowing in the soft light. The main character, a plump-cheeked grandfatherly type, could be thought of as symbolizing Father Christmas, or a beardless Santa. The 'grandfather' and the children are gathered around the dining room table. After holding up the 'virtually spotless' glass for all to admire, he plays a tune (We Wish You A Merry Christmas) on the glasses, the children in smiling accompaniment. The entire commercial symbolizes Christmas, reinforced by the music, the colors, the entire milieu. The symbols are secular, certainly, as befits our secular age.

Some of the criticism of commercials, and advertising itself, centers around the fact that it does not depict us, i.e., society, realistically. But does the public really wish for an exact mirror? Through the ages, it is the idealized versions of life that have been admired, and even revered. One only needs to look at the history of painting to observe this phenomenon. Montagu declares that ". . . it should be the function of television to

¹⁴Erving Goffman, Gender Advertisements, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1976), p. 23.

exhibit the image of man as he can and should be." Montagu also said that "Television is in an unrivaled position to bridge for us the gap between the world of what is and what ought to be."¹⁵ Certainly television commercials try to do just that: show the public the way the world ought to be, if that public would only use the advertised product.

The Pulitzer prize-winning columnist, Ellen Goodman noted that she was probably not alone in her "new delight with television commercials." She then quoted Yale Ph.D. candidate Mark Edmundson, who described commercials as powerful myths. "They tell us things we like to hear: that the world makes sense, that quandaries have resolution . . ."¹⁶

Certain commercials do concern themselves with myths, in much the same way that commercials use symbols: to communicate something about ourselves or our heritage, quickly and densely. Consider the Marlboro Man, as the embodiment of the myth of the West.

Myths are a way of "mediating truths about reality."¹⁷ There are other television commercials that have a mythic quality, that help explain ourselves to ourselves. Hero worship in the form of a small boy looking up with reverent eyes to a large, heroic male figure, in the well-known Mean Joe Green commercial for Coca Cola, typifies myth in commercials. Hero worship comes to us through a long history in literature. Consider the boy and the old man, Santiago, in Ernest Hemingway's Old Man and the Sea. There is Isaac

¹⁵Patrick Hazard, Television As Art, Campaign, (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1966), p. 13.

¹⁶Goodman, loc. cit.

¹⁷Goethals, op. cit., p. 25.

McCaslin, looking up to Sam Father, in William Faulkner's The Bear. Another classic example is in a different medium: in the movie, Shane, the boy, Joey, worships the lone westerner, from whom the movie gets its title.

Television commercials, then, can be seen as using symbols, and myths, and metaphors, to convey meanings of more than just a product. Additionally, they convey feelings, emotions and in some cases, stories, that are rooted in our history.

As Montagu said, "Man is a myth-making animal, and the myth-making faculty assists him to explain whatever is in need of explanation."¹⁸

Symbols are used in commercials, as well as other art forms, to communicate quickly and succinctly. Myths have a similar use, but can be used to explain and comfort man, with the familiar or the strange made familiar.

The Coca Cola commercial, although used to sell a soft drink, can touch us with the myth of hero worship. But here, in a scene showing a young David and a formidable Goliath, Goliath turns out to be a kindly giant.

Or, as Goethals points out "As we approach the end of the twentieth century, the mass media, especially television, has emerged as a major conveyor of public symbols. Television has woven a web of myths, furnishing the rhythms, the visual extravaganzas, the pseudo-liturgical seasons that break up the ordinariness of our lives."¹⁹

This is what the best television commercials: convey to the audience through symbols, metaphors and myths, the feelings and emotions deeply rooted in our culture.

¹⁸Robert Lewis Shayon, The Eighth Art, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 130.

¹⁹Goethals, op. cit., p. 142.